



**UNPLUGGED Special Forum: Around the  
Communicative Constitution of Organizations  
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**UNPLUGGED Special Forum:** Around the Communicative Constitution of organizations perspective, M@n@gement, à paraître.

Cooren, F., Vaara, E., Langley, A., & Tsoukas, H. (Eds.) (2014) *Language and communication at work: Discourse, narrativity and organizing*, Perspectives on Process Organization Studies, Volume 4. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

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*L'évènement fondateur du contrat social ne remonte pas à quelque petit matin  
préhistorique de l'humanité ; on le repasse à chaque conversation.*

Bounoux (1989: 254)

The fourth work in the series *Perspectives on Process Organization Studies* is linked to the annual International Symposium on Process Organization Studies (June 2012). This collection is devoted to voices that claim that organizations have to be explored as processes in the making (Hernes, 2007 ; Langley & Tsoukas, 2010). François Cooren, Eero Vaara, Ann Langley, and Haridimos Tsoukas invite us to articulate organizational process research studies with various theoretical discursive perspectives, using the fruitful metaphor of work.

## **MAIN PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE OF THE VOLUME**

As mentioned at the very beginning of the book, *Language and Communication at Work* means many things and can be related to a large variety of theoretical and methodological approaches. For decades, linguistics, discourse<sup>1</sup> analysis and communication studies have gained a respectable status in the organizational literature, especially since the eighties, with the “interpretive turn” (Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983). Nevertheless, they were often used in a functionalist or restrictive way by organizational scholars. Language and communication were focused on language alone as if they were in a vacuum and detached from other sociomaterial practices, activities, and actions. Organizations, in turn, were often metaphorically understood as containers of communication (Putnam, Phillips, Chapman, 1994), as “a bracketed space in which communication occurs” (Ashcraft, Kuhn & Cooren, 2009: 9).

At the same time, and since then, other scholars have maintained that language and communication have to move beyond these narrow views. Not only are they part of organizational life (or work) (Borzeix & Fraenkel, 2001) but they are also constitutive of

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<sup>1</sup> In his latest book, Cooren (2015) explains how we can differentiate between Discourse with a “D” as relatively durable, and institutionalized, focusing on repetition, and reproduction (textual modality), and discourse with a “d”, as erratic, grounded and local which focuses on the eventful character of conversation and interaction (conversational modality) (see, in particular, pp. 4–10).

work (Engeström & Middleton, 1996; Lacoste, 2001) – and, more widely – *organizing* (Boden, 1994; Cooren, Taylor & Van Every, 2006; McPhee & Zaug, 2000; Putnam, et al., 1994; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009; Taylor, 1993; Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Weick, 1979). Part of this book is deeply embedded in this last approach. The editors add two other intricate processual questions: how language and communication actually work, i.e. *do* things in the broad contexts of organizing and what role they play as part of strategic and institutional work in and around organizational phenomena (p. 2). Moreover, the main purpose is to articulate various theoretical views of language and communication (at work) with organizational processual perspectives, which are the essence of these annual series. The challenge is exciting: ‘knitting’ these views with organizations-in-the-making streams of research constitutes a new step for cross-disciplinary studies that will illuminate the organizational process research agenda (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas & Van de Ven, 2013; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

The book consists of 13 chapters, including the introduction, which is written by François Cooren, Eero Vaara, Ann Langley, and Haridimos Tsoukas. The authors come from different disciplines, thus establishing a valuable dialogue between them: communication, (socio)linguistics, sociology, psychology, organizational behavior, management and organization studies, marketing, strategic management. Broadening the scope of “(at) work” to include pluralistic meanings opens up various avenues for collaboration between organizational and communication research, as suggested by Ashcraft et al. (2009). Many of the chapters are based on empirical material and employ various strategies and methods, such as ethnomethodology/conversation analysis (Chapter 4), ethnography (Chapters 3, 6, 11, and 12), narrative analysis (Chapter 10), and critical discourse analysis (Chapter 3). Other chapters are more conceptual and theoretically oriented (Chapters 2 and 5), illustrative (Chapters 7 and 8), or questioning of methodology (Chapters 9 and 13).

Another interesting feature of the book is the large variety of contexts and settings under scrutiny: meetings (Chapters 3, 4, and 5), a large electricity company (Chapter 5), a mountaineering expedition (Chapter 6), the design of a large organization (Chapter 7), a management coaching conversation (Chapter 8), the famous 2005 Stanford Commencement Speech given by Steve Jobs (Chapter 10), the resuscitation bay of an emergency department (Chapter 11), three regional health authorities (Chapter 12), and the research process itself (Chapter 13).

The editors suggest that one should read the volume through four ‘lenses,’ and reflect on the methodological questions and challenges they open up.

The four lenses are as follows:

- the constitutive role and power of communication;
- the discursive and communicative practices that form a constitutive part of the daily life of organizations;
- the emphasis on temporal (and spatial) construction and reconstruction in discursive practices;

– the connection of discursive practices with other social and material ones.

## **THROUGH THE BOOK: AN OVERVIEW OF THE FOUR LENSES**

These four lenses are unequally present through the book but all in all, the different chapters illustrate how they can help us to theorize how “discursive work” matters for processual research studies.

### **Communication as Constitutive of Organization (CCO)**

To a greater or lesser extent, the entire book may be read as a defense of a ‘strong’ view of communication which flows through some scholars as a way of theorizing communication as well as organizations. As mentioned above, the first restrictive/functionalist perspectives maintained that communication was “located within a reified, materialistic organizational structure” (Putnam, et al., 1994: 375). According to us, after the first “*révolution de palais*” (Taylor, 2003: 3) of the interpretive turn (Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983) mentioned earlier, the second one happened when James Taylor’s (1993)<sup>2</sup> “conversation/text theory” gave rise to more radical views of communication, subsequently embedded in what scholars labelled “*Communication as Constitutive of Organization*” (CCO) (McPhee & Zaug, 2000; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009).

To put it briefly, this perspective will develop the idea of the organizing properties of communication, the term “constitutive” being referred to and interpreted in various ways, and not necessary familiar to all organizational and management scholars. Taking the ‘stronger’ version, communication cannot be reduced to what people say and write even if interactions are taken up in subsequent encounters: they are not sufficient to constitute an organization (Cooren, 2015; Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009). The argument goes beyond interactional patterns as building blocks of the organization (Boden, 1994). Incorporating Latour’s work (1996, 2005), the CCO turn focuses “on how and what people do things locally, but [...] extend[s] this action-oriented approach to [...] non-human actors, which can have textual forms [statuses, rules, protocols] or not [spatial arrangements, uniforms, furniture]” (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009: 124 and 137). CCO scholars do not focus solely on human interactions and sensemaking activities; they extend the concept of communication to what non-humans *do*. Thus, this turn has to be understood, not as a refinement of other theories, but as a radical shift: “discourse (or communication in general) constitutes the very means by which organizational forms [...] are *brought into being*” [...]. Discourse consists of a series of *acts that transforms the world*, as minimal and iterative as these transformations may be” (Cooren, 2015: 12 and 59, author’s emphasis). The introduction and part of the present volume are clearly constitutive-oriented: “It is through communication that we get organized and act collectively” (p. 10). Four chapters can be clearly included in the (radical) CCO approach.

Honoring the founder of this constitutive turn, the core of the volume opens up with Chapter 2, written by James Taylor himself, inspired by the reading and re-examination of Thomas

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<sup>2</sup> James R. Taylor is considered as the founding father of the Montréal School of Organizational Communication, at the origin of the constitutive view that we briefly sum up hereafter.

Hobbes's *Leviathan*. He discusses the emergence and construction of the organization as an entity with the identity of a person who then is repeatedly reconstructed in the conversations and texts generated by its members. Through this process – Impersonating the Organization – these members can thereby establish their own authority (Taylor & Van Every, 2014) as its agents, translators, and representatives. By reversing Austin's (1962) concept of "speech act", Chapter 5 focuses on "action discursivity": if words do things, acts speak also. Why? Because acts involved in collective activity – considered as a dialogical discourse – are also signs which point to socially built meanings, across time and space, that is to say instituted and stabilized areas of meanings. Clearly embedded in the constitutive view, Chapter 7 analyzes the design of a large organization as a communicative constitution of space. We can remember that, by expanding our conception of language and communication, not only words but also spatial arrangements, habits, practices, furniture, artifacts, principles, and values, do also communicate. This chapter illustrates how a strong version of communication can reframe the topic of design activity associated with organizational space. Using "a sociomaterially-informed CCO view" (p. 163), the authors aim to extend it to design, linking the interactional with the material space of design's enactment: "[t]o design [...] is to do sociomaterial work, and that work can be illuminated by CCO-based visions of relational agency, authoritative texts, and spaces" (p. 167). Spatial arrangements tell us something about what or who is made present or absent in and through them. Chapter 11 refers to the same approach and will be discussed later.

### **Practices of language use**

More than 20 years ago, in her provocative work, Boden (1994: 8), claimed that *the business of talk* is "not just fleeting details of the moment". As part of the daily life of organizations, discursive practices may be observed as micro-interactions *per se*, focusing on a very local level. They can *also* be explored as (re)producing, confirming features, procedures, and routines, and transforming the social or organizational life by the way. "[Organizations] are constituted moment to moment, interaction to interaction, day to day – across the *durée* of institutional time" (*ibidem*). Many chapters are inspired by this work, adding or articulating other theoretical traditions such as critical discourse analysis or rhetoric.

In Chapter 8, micro-practices of management coaching are carefully analyzed through a conversation with a middle manager, a specific form of talk-at-work. The authors differentiate between Discursive views (historically forms of ideas) and discursive practices (locally/contextually produced achievements). They wonder which discourses the speakers draw upon within their narrations, and how they enact them through discursive practices (p. 179). The analysis of four episodes of a conversation shows how a set of predefined managerial discourses tend to be actively (re-)enacted by the coach. At the same time, "the coach tunes in to the manager's discourse in a supposedly sympathetic way by highlighting, mirroring, and commenting on the emotionally laden aspects of the narration" (p. 190) while enrolling him in her favored interpretations. The analysis "leads to the assumption that management coaching attempts to indirectly shape employees' behavior by controlling the intimate constructions of their selves" (p. 191). Chapter 10 explores how myths are created and sustained. Drawing on different literatures, the chapter provides a three-part framework

based on narrative analysis and the literature about myths, in order to analyze the famous 2005 Stanford Commencement Speech given by Steve Jobs. “The speech can be seen as narrative-at-work as it reveals rhetorical processes at play when constructing and reconstructing organizational myths” (p. 8). Myth-making is analyzed as a process in which myths of heroic business leaders are communicatively created, maintained, reproduced, and institutionalized through time and spaces.

Chapters 3 and 4 echo a recurrent theme in critical studies: language and communication are not power and control-free (Fairclough, 2005; Mumby, 1988). These scholars aim at denouncing forms of control, inequality, and oppression that language use contributes to producing, reproducing, and also altering. Meetings are central *loci* of these processes: in Chapter 3, Ruth Wodak shows how language is demanding work in a meeting of European Union decision-makers, in particular when analyzing the micro-level discursive dynamics involved (p. 6). From an ethnomethodology-driven perspective, Chapter 4 analyzes a strategy meeting through the first-order practices of its members. It focuses on how people use category-bound reasoning procedures through which “they make their own organization”. Talk actively brings into being organizational attributes, as people use accounts of power(-talk) and politics(-talk) during social interactions to make sense in meetings. The authors show that studying language-in-use in naturally occurring interactions is a fruitful contribution to grasping how accounts by members “not only *describe* the world, but [...] reveal its *constitution*” (p. 75). While critical studies treat power and politics primarily as external ‘forces,’ operating ‘outside’ talk, and constraining/shaping social action, here, power and politics are analyzed as unstable outcomes of a never-ending sensemaking process that members accomplish themselves.

### **Communicating as timing and spacing**

This third lens is less present throughout the book. This is surprising, because the very purpose of the series is directly linked to time/timing, which is at the heart of all processes (Langley et al., 2013). If other chapters include time/timing, only two (Chapters 6 and 11) tackle “a key question related to the processual paradigm, i.e. how language and communication allow us to enact specific times and spaces in which we can then navigate” (p. 11). These two chapters echo in part the Special Issue of *Organization* (November 2004), where Cooren and Fairhurst (2004: 794-795), by means of a detailed schematic analysis of organizational interactions, showed “how interactions contribute – and sometimes fail to contribute – to the fabrication of spatio-temporal closures which define the structures of organizing processes”. This early study opened up new ways of analyzing coordination processes, particularly in high-reliability organizing (*ibid.*: 805). In doing so, they have given flesh to the concept of “double interact” in Weick’s (1979) research, which has greatly inspired organization and communication theories (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009).

Mengis and Hohmann (Chapter 11) focus on the work of collaborators in the resuscitation bay of an emergency department. Based on a focused ethnography, they study how multiple professional groups have to coordinate in order to stabilize and diagnose a critically ill patient when the task at hand evolves and develops in unexpected directions (p. 261). Three temporal

practices are identified: fabricating the present, re-performing the past in the present, and expanding the future present. Recent past and imminent future are conversationally and materially drawn into the present. Coordinating involves temporal work, so time is not understood as a contextual ‘given’ background within which coordination practices are embedded: it is an outcome of communicative activity. Time is neither in the analytical background nor an objective reality but the “active – both conversational and material – drawing together [...] of the temporally distributed attempts of coordinating work” (p. 263). In keeping with the CCO approach, the study also highlights “how materiality and its close entanglement with conversational practices come into play” (p. 286).

Located in a more ‘exotic’ place – a mountaineering expedition in South Patagonia – Chapter 6 is inspired by Cooren and Fairhurst’s (2004) frame mentioned above. It shows how, in this specific project-based organization, “time, space *and* calculation are not only discursively and conversationally constructed: they are also constitutive of the expedition in and of itself” (p. 139). Coping with non-human entities – the raging ocean and the stormy weather ‘spoke’ very loudly – insufficient information gathering and unexpected disruptions, the initial project (crossing the Darwin Cordillera for the first time in history) turned into a modest few “firsts” in a limited area around Mount Shipton/Darwin. “The crow’s flight” as a context-specific chronotope (Bakhtin) was used as a flexible unit of time- and space-communicative calculation during the expedition and afterward, in a subsequent movie and conferences. It allowed the climbers to make sense of unexpected situations when sensemaking was a daily puzzle, so that they could frame and reframe spatiotemporal objectives as well as the project itself through time and space.

### **Placing language and communication in their sociomaterial context**

We can interpret such a title in at least two ways:

- A ‘loose’ one, considering that materiality is the background and language and communication the figure. Such a meaning is another way of going back to the container metaphor or of bringing human-centered interactions and meaning making into the center of the picture. If communication never takes place in a vacuum, materiality is the ground upon which communication stands up;
- A second way, more disruptive, is first related to the work of Bruno Latour (1996, 2005) and then re-appropriated by the CCO turn, and also by other scholars who argue for bringing materiality back in (Carlile, Nicolini, Langley & Tsoukas, 2013/2014). Both consider that “who or what communicates can certainly be individuals, but also architectural elements, artifacts, and even principles, ideas or values” (Cooren, 2015: 9). Saying that communication never takes place in a vacuum suggests that we must examine the interrelationships of communication and other social and material practices. Language and communication are not only ‘beside’ a material world; they are entangled (Gherardi, 2012; Jones, 2013/2014) in a world which ‘speaks’ also because non-human entities *do* things. This is not just to say that the CCO turn is sociomaterially sensitive, but also that agency results from a hybridization of humans and non-humans. Reconceptualizing communication in this way “acknowledges the interactions between entities of variable ontologies” (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009: 139), and not only human beings.



Chapter 11 (discussed above) shows how “organizational actors coordinate their distributed activities by mobilizing a textual world of understandings *and* a sociomaterial world of practical concerns in conversations” (authors’ emphasis) (p. 264). In the same vein, Chapter 7 shows that assemblages of heterogeneous elements (interests, persons, technologies) produce agency, realized through interactive events. Using a practice lens (Nicolini, 2012), Chapter 12 shows how moral judgment making is enacted, “*in situ*, by individuals through their dialogical interactions with co-present others, as well as with non-present or ‘imagined’ others, and material artifacts at hand” (p. 299). The framework emphasizes that such an accomplishment is not only a local achievement; it takes into account the wider group of non-present actors and other authoritative resources as “fairness”, as a higher-order principle which transcends the ‘here’ and ‘now’ of the contingent local interactions.

### **Reflecting on our challenges for a constitutive view of organiz-*ing***

Two chapters notably respond to this invitation. Chapter 9 brings the reader from the present state of storytelling research to “the cutting edge of process theory in storytelling” (p. 197). David Boje and R. Saylor explore “ ‘quantum storytelling’ as a new kind of ontological perspective that helps to better understand processual aspects of organizational narrativity” (p. 8). Chapter 13 brings an interesting methodological perspective by challenging conventional research as well as conceptions of researcher’s reflexivity. Drawing on Lévinas’s work, the authors contend for “an ethical openness to the other [i.e. professional participants] and an exposure to the teaching of the other – a vulnerability of the self [i.e. the researcher]” (p. 327). This provocative perspective locates reflexivity in inter-subjective (conversational) experiencing and not only in the researcher “as a peculiar kind of self-controlling, knowledge-generating, reflexive voyeur” (p. 326). By doing so, the power and perils of this position they name “Other-vulnerability”, leave the researcher (and the research process) in an open – but uncomfortable position. He moves from the frozen “said” to a knowing-with standpoint – the “saying” – while sacrificing his self-security of knowing-about (p. 331). Thus, such a position calls for a humbling and a subordination of the researcher as an ‘expert’ *vis-à-vis* his conversational partners as other experts too.

### **GOING FURTHER ?**

By emphasizing the role that discursive perspectives (in general) play in unfolding organizational processes, the volume encourages scholars to go on with language and communication as *a part of* but also as *constitutive of* them. If some chapters resolutely challenge existing traditions, others apply them to specific organizational contexts and processes at various levels of analysis. The whole book – dedicated to process organization studies – intends to show that we have to depart from a narrow view of communication *per se*: if matter matters, language and communication *also* matter, be they in the details of local interactions or in more ‘macro’ unfolding processes. Communication not only brings organizations alive in bounded episodes, but also transforms them through time and space.

In their highly stimulating survey, Ashcraft et al. (2009: 2) invited “management and communication scholars to a common conversation”, stressing that fruitful interdisciplinary

collaborations could be engaged. We could add that many of the practice-based scholars share many views with the language and communication literature (e.g. Gherardi, 2012; Nicolini, 2012), and more specifically on the subject of organizational materiality. The same closeness appears when reading the previous volume in this series, *How Matter Matters. Objects, Artifacts and Materiality in Organization Studies*<sup>3</sup> (Carlile et al., 2013/2014). Readers interested in the CCO approach will find many chapters which seem to be very close to it, in particular those written by John Shotter and Mathew Jones. These convergences about ontological and epistemological foundations could pave the way for developing promising collaborative research avenues – perhaps in a future symposium?

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<sup>3</sup> The Symposium took place in June 2011.

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